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A possible new taxon of rock thrush *Monticola* sp. from the limestone karst region of western Madagascar

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L'observation, en juin 1995, d'un monticole inconnu et de son nid dans la réserve naturelle du Tsingy de Bemaraha, ouest de Madagascar, est décrite. Le plumage du mâle est intermédiaire entre ceux du Monticole de forêt *Monticola s. sharpei* et du Monticole de la montagne d'Amber *M. s. erythronotus*, taxons récemment traités comme espèces distinctes par plusieurs auteurs. La population de Bemaraha a été découverte en 1994; des observations supplémentaires ont été faites en 1998. Les différences avec *sharpei* et *erythronotus* sont décrites dans une note supplémentaire.

During June 1995, as members of a malacological expedition to the Tsingy de Bemaraha Nature Reserve, an area of limestone karst in western Madagascar, we established a base at the south edge of the reserve by the Manomboko River and close to Bekopaka village. From here we made sorties into the surrounding areas to look for snails but also taking the opportunity to look for birds and explore caves³.

Late in the afternoon of 18 June 2 km north of the village of Kinajao, 11 km north-east of Bekopaka (19°24'S 44°48'E) we located a male rock thrush *Monticola* sp. perched on a boulder near the entrance of a cave. The light was poor and we were unable to get good views. Since we were aware that no rock thrushes had been recorded from the reserve¹ and it was outside the known range for all the Malagasy *Monticola* taxa^{2,5}, we returned next morning to obtain better views of the bird. We relocated a pair of rock thrushes near to the area of the original sighting. The female was furtive and skulking, being difficult to keep in view for more than brief periods. The male, by contrast, was relatively confiding and perched prominently on bushes and rocks that, to judge by the accumulation of droppings, were regularly used. Both birds were seen at distances down to 2m in good light.

We were able to compare the birds with illustrations and descriptions of rock thrushes in Langrand². The male did not match any of the taxa described, although the female was not, from our observations, separable from those of the Forest Rock Thrush *Monticola sharpei sharpei* and Mt. Amber Rock Thrush *M. s. erythronotus*.

The birds were on the edge of the Tsingy reserve next to the large limestone wall that, at this point, was c40 m high and were frequenting an area of scrub and disrupted canopy forest growing out of a steep boulder field at the base of the cliff.

We kept one or both of the birds in view for most of the two-hour observation period. They kept out of direct sunlight and spent much of the time actively foraging. The male caught a pale green caterpillar, c2.5 cm long, that it beat against a branch before consuming it. A hawk-moth, c5 cm long, was unsuccessfully attacked by the male and both birds were seen to descend to the ground to take small unidentified food items. Both were silent except for a brief quiet warble given by the male.

Two old nests in rocky recesses that we found were believed to belong to this pair. Both were a loose weave of roots and stems lined with leaves. The first nest was c25 cm in diameter and 12.5 cm deep and the

cup, which was positioned toward the rear of the nest, was c10 cm across. The nest was set in a recess 45 cm wide and deep and 25 cm high above the nest. The second nest was similar but larger, an oval shape, c37.5 x 45 cm, again with the cup toward the rear of the nest, near the wall of the rocky recess.

We compared our photographs and field descriptions with study skins at the Natural History Museum (Tring). Details of the female agreed with those of Forest and Mt. Amber Rock Thrushes, as we had noted in the field. The male, however, possessed characteristics of both (Sinclair & Langrand⁶ and Morris & Hawkins' recognise both as species-level taxa). The intense russet-coloured ventral plumage and the grey-blue head are similar to *erythronotus* while the dorsal colouring of grey-blue, becoming russet on the rump, is characteristic of *sharpei*. This record provides a record of what may be a new taxon of *Monticola* rock thrush in Madagascar.

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Frank Hawkins has commented as follows. 'This population was first discovered in November 1994, by Ramanitra Narisoa Andriamboavonjy, while conducting field studies in Bemaraha. Brief details of the sighting were published (Ramanitra, N.A. 1995. Inventaire préliminaire de l'avifaune du Tsingy de Bemaraha. *Working Group on Birds in the Madagascar Region Newsletter* 5 (1): 7–10). In July 1998, the ZICOMA team made a visit to this area and trapped a female *Monticola* (see plates 3–5), from which a blood sample was taken. Observations of its behaviour were made, as was a tape-recording of the song. A Malagasy student is now working on the taxonomy of Malagasy rock thrushes based on song structure, and we also await the results of DNA analysis of the blood samples. The important distinctions between this taxon and that of *M. sharpei* are: males have considerably less blue on the throat than *sharpei* and thus resemble *M. erythronotus* (see Morris & Hawkins⁴), except that they have a blue rather than reddish mantle, and the lower back is more rufous than in *erythronotus*. Both sexes are also much redder on the tail than *M. sharpei* (again like *M. erythronotus*). The female is rather more rufous than female *sharpei*, especially in the wide upper-breast band, although *sharpei* are rather variable in this feature. The female lacked the whitish upper-breast streaks of *sharpei*, another feature similar to *erythronotus*. However this population is much further removed from *M. erythronotus* than from *M. sharpei*, so it is very unlikely to be closely related to *erythronotus*.'

Captions for photos on page 54.

- 1 Male rock thrush *Monticola* sp., Kinajao, western Madagascar, 18 June 1995 (Kirsty J. Swinnerton)
- 2 Dorsal view of male rock thrush *Monticola* sp., Kinajao, western Madagascar, 18 June 1995 (Kirsty J. Swinnerton)
- 3–5 Views of adult female rock thrush *Monticola* sp., Bemaraha National Park, Madagascar, July 1998 (Frank Hawkins)
- 6–7 Rock thrush *Monticola* sp. nest, Kinajao, western Madagascar, 18 June 1995 (Kirsty J. Swinnerton)